

Frequently Asked Questions



Here are common questions about religious pluralism, as well as helpful information to guide you.

Q. Is religious pluralism the same thing as religious diversity?

A. **No, diversity alone ≠ pluralism.** Religious diversity is the existence of many faiths, traditions, and belief systems, but religious pluralism requires:

- Knowledge and respect of one another's faith identities
- Acknowledgment of our differences without expectation of ideological agreement on all issues
- Positive relationships across faith communities
- Proactive effort and a collective commitment to the common good

Q. I know there is no “official” religion in the United States, but isn't Christianity the most important?

A. Although the majority of Americans (roughly 70%) identify as Christian¹, **the U.S. Constitution is a secular document, with no mention of Christianity or God.**² Further, the First Amendment assures free exercise of religion for all, and it specifies that Congress may not establish State support for any religion.

Many founding documents similarly reinforce this point. For example, the Treaty of Tripoli states *“As the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian Religion...it is declared by the parties that no pretext arising from religious opinions shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries.”*³

Q. How does racial and ethnic diversity interact with religious pluralism?

A. **Religious diversity, by denomination alone, does not tell the whole story.** Religious denominations and faith communities tend to be associated with racial and ethnic identities, and in many cases, dynamics of race and power throughout history have made this deliberate. Awareness of the complexities and varieties of intersections between race, ethnicity, culture, country of origin, and religion is part of creating a thriving religious pluralism.

Q. Do I have to be an expert in religions (or my own) before I can talk about them?

A. We cannot be experts on all religions. Instead, **when talking about religion, you should:**

- Ensure a safe and inclusive environment for conversation
- Allow participants to explore their own identities
- Learn alongside others in the conversation
- Explore commonalities among different belief systems
- Examine your assumptions about religion⁴

It is everyone's responsibility to have a certain level of religious literacy or knowledge about the basic tenets of the world's major religious traditions. This [World Religions Fact Sheet](#)⁵ provides a good overview.

Q. Is it against the law to talk about religion in public?

A. **No!** The Constitution guarantees your right to talk about religion as part of your First Amendment rights of free expression and speech.

Only government employees, because of the Establishment Clause, are forbidden from promoting or criticizing any particular faith while on the job.

Q. Why should members of majority faiths or people who don't believe in God care about religious pluralism?

A. Religious pluralism creates the conditions **that provide the rights, freedoms, and safety for all Americans to worship, or not, according to their conscience.** Like other American rights and freedoms, protecting someone's right to worship also protects someone's right not to worship.

In addition, we live in a society with many different religions. Everyone—including those in the majority faith and those with are religiously unaffiliated—must productively engage with the religious diversity in the world.

Q. I am hearing a lot about religious nationalism right now. How does that fit into this topic?

A. **Religious nationalism is the attempt to create or enforce an ethno-religious majority.** It decreases minority freedoms in favor of the religious community that controls the levers of power, and it works against a thriving religious pluralism.

1 “Religious Landscape Study.” Pew Research Center, 2014, <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>.

2 “Is America a Christian Nation?” Americans United for Separation of Church and State, <https://www.au.org/resources/publications/is-america-a-christian-nation>.

3 The Barbary Treaties, 1786-1816, Treating of Peace and Friendship, November 4, 1796, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/bar1796t.asp.

4 Fowler, Mark. “How to Teach Religion Without Being an Expert.” Education Week, August 10, 2015, https://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/global_learning/2015/08/how_to_teach_about_religion_without_being_a_religion_expert.html.

5 “World Religions Fact Sheet.” Tanenbaum, 2011, <http://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/general/World%20Religions%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf>.